Literacy First: A Plan for Action

2010

Alberta

Government of Alberta

ALBERTA EDUCATION CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Alberta. Alberta Education. Arts, Communications and Citizenship.
Literacy first : a plan for action.

ISBN 978–0–7785–8591–6

1. Literacy – Alberta. 2. Literacy programs – Alberta – Planning.
3. Educational change – Alberta. I. Title.

LC154.2.A3 A333 2010 302.224 4

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> Literacy is more than the ability to read and write. It involves the knowledge, skills and abilities—the competencies—that enable individuals to think critically, communicate effectively, deal with change and solve problems in a variety of contexts to achieve their personal goals, develop their knowledge and potential, and participate fully in society.
>
> Government of Alberta, 2009b, p.6

Introduction

Literacy is the foundation for continuous learning and a vital characteristic of the highly skilled population needed for Alberta's next generation economy. Literacy has benefits for individuals, society and the economy. Stronger literacy skills are associated with higher income, better health and greater social and civic engagement.

In the Kindergarten to Grade 12 system, students need to develop a broad and deep range of literacy skills so they can have the literacy future they deserve, optimize their lifelong learning potential and become active, participating members of their communities and the wider society.

Literacy has always been the keystone of learning. Changes in society and the rapidly evolving technologies of the 21st century have increased the intensity and complexity of literate environments. The 21st century challenges us to rethink what being a fully literate person means.

Literacy is an important priority across Canada. The 2007 Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) Literacy Action Plan committed the provinces and territories to working together to increase the literacy levels of all Canadians and help Canadians acquire the highest level of literacy skills in the world.

Living Literacy: A Literacy Framework for Alberta's Next Generation Economy (September 2009) was developed as a cross-ministry provincial framework to support CMEC's literacy priority. It is the result of research and consultation with adult literacy learners, parents

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and representatives from early learning, Kindergarten to Grade 12, post-secondary institutions, community organizations, libraries, employers, industry associations and Alberta government ministries.

Responding effectively to students' literacy needs demands innovative solutions, a clear direction and a commitment to collaboration. As part of its commitment to the provincial literacy framework, Alberta Education conducted extensive research and consultation on literacy to develop a plan of action for the Kindergarten to Grade12 system.

Literacy First: A Plan for Action outlines the strategies and priority actions that Alberta Education will undertake to support the provincial literacy framework, *Living Literacy: A Literacy Framework for Alberta's Next Generation Economy* (September 2009) and the 2007 CMEC Literacy Action Plan.

This Action Plan also supports key Alberta Education initiatives, including *Setting the Direction*, *Inspiring Education* and the Government of Alberta response *Inspiring Action on Education*.

The following model from *Inspiring Action on Education*, page 9, depicts the competencies needed by 21st century learners to be active participants in an increasingly knowledge-based and globalized society

It is clear that literacy remains a foundational competency that is of primary importance to all learning. Learners with strong literacy skills, acquire, create, connect and communicate meaning in a wide variety of contexts.

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What We Have Heard About Literacy

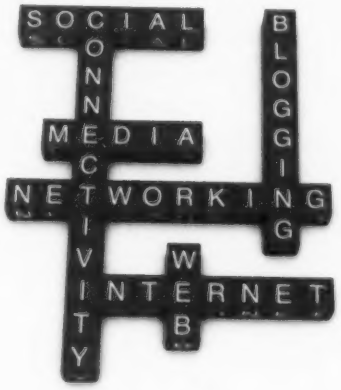
Through consultations, conversations and feedback with educators, Alberta Education heard literacy success stories across the province. We also heard challenges with literacy that needs more focused attention. We identified six key themes that require this focused attention. *Literacy First: A Plan for Action* is Alberta Education's response to the six key literacy themes. These will drive our work toward supporting literacy for educators and students in this province.

1. What is Literacy? – A need for a definition of literacy to reflect its complex nature

The following definition of literacy has received wide acceptance from stakeholders across the province and is based on research and consultative input.

Literacy is acquiring, creating, connecting and communicating meaning in a wide variety of contexts.

Many definitions of literacy exist but at their core most definitions relate to oral language and an individual's ability to understand and communicate through text. Traditionally, literacy development in schools involved a linear progression of learning, often using a series of print-only, controlled vocabulary, basal readers to learn to read, print-only reference books to acquire information, and prescriptive templates for writing.



Today's students are accessing and communicating information in ways unimaginable to their parents as students, or even to students of five to 10 years ago. Today, literacy has become even more complex as "new literacies" have emerged. The proliferation of new digital technologies and the growing accessibility of information on the Internet are transforming how students acquire, create, connect and communicate meaning in a variety of contexts.

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Students can now instantly connect and communicate with a worldwide audience. They are becoming empowered in their ability to share information and have others around the world instantly respond to their ideas. They have and use multiple formats and channels of communication and creativity. Today's youth connect and communicate through means such as blogs, wikis, Facebook, instant messaging and texting. They not only acquire information from print sources but can listen to podcasts, webinars, visit countless websites such as Flickr for the distribution and sharing of images, and share video via YouTube and other sites. The literacies of today are no longer linear but multimodal and multilayered.

Alberta educators agree that it is more important than ever that we teach and develop a wider set of literacy skills so that students know how to filter, evaluate and make critical judgements as to the accuracy and ethical use of information that they acquire. It is imperative that the education system prepare students for today and also for the ever-evolving future of tomorrow by ensuring students are able to solve problems, think critically and creatively, collaborate and communicate, master digital literacy and know how to learn in diverse environments.

2. The importance of building literacy skills in curriculum for all subjects and grades

Research shows that students need opportunities to use literacy knowledge and skills in a variety of contexts to master and efficiently transfer them from one area to another. Students may not automatically transfer literacy knowledge and skills without explicit instruction. The assumption that these should be taught in the language arts classroom is prevalent, but literacy instruction must be embedded across the curriculum to both support meaning and developed by the growing complexity of content.

Educators know that for students to use literacy more effectively to learn in content-area subjects, teachers must have a deeper understanding of what literacy means in their subject areas. Each academic discipline has its own particular text features, formats and vocabulary (e.g., reading the Periodic Table of Elements in Chemistry, creating a piece of art, debating with another class via video conference). Students need to develop literacy skills that transcend subject areas as well as the subject-specific applications of those skills. This is particularly so in junior and senior high, where "as adolescents experience the shift to content area learning, they receive the help from teachers to develop the confidence and skills necessary for specialized academic literacies" (NCTE, 2007, p. 3).

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3. Literacy as a factor in high school completion rates

Student dropout rates and high school completion are of great concern to Albertans. It is common knowledge that high school non-completers generally have a harder time earning a living to support themselves and being active, contributing members of society. Although there are numerous factors why students do not complete high school, one commonly cited reason is that students do not have the literacy skills to keep pace with the high school curriculum, which has become increasingly complex (Biancarosa and Snow, 2006).

The transfer of literacy knowledge and skills becomes critically important in junior high and senior high school, where students are often required to use subject-specific vocabulary to demonstrate their understanding of complex text structures, formulas and graphic elements. In junior and senior high school, students encounter academic discourses and disciplinary concepts in such fields as science, mathematics and the social sciences that require different reading approaches from those used with more familiar literary and personal narratives (Kucer, 2005, p. 32).

4. Diversity of the Kindergarten to Grade 12 student population and the need for more literacy support for all learners

Alberta's growing diversity is reflected in our Kindergarten to Grade12 student population who come to school with varying literacy levels and cultural backgrounds. Every day, educators in the province are working with students who are learning content in English or in French, while also learning the language. Student's first language abilities also vary and some students may have literacy challenges in their first language.

The province's commitment to inclusive education means building a sense of belonging and providing equitable opportunities for all students to experience success. The diversity of Alberta learners illustrates the need for a broad, inclusive approach to literacy that addresses individual learners' needs.

Educators in the province told us that they need support in building social, cultural, linguistic and experiential bridges for ethnically, culturally, linguistically and ability-diverse students.

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5. The need for literacy professional learning for all K–12 teachers

During provincial consultations, Alberta educators stated that they needed professional learning opportunities to further develop their understanding of what literacy is and of how to enhance literacy practices within their subject disciplines. A recurring theme in the province-wide consultations was that literacy development is the responsibility of all teachers in all content areas. The notion that "all teachers are teachers of literacy" was stated and heard repeatedly.

All teachers need continued support and professional development opportunities that assist them to "teach literacy in their discipline as an essential way of learning in their disciplines" (NCTE, 2004).

6. Literacy is a shared responsibility

Throughout the consultation process in literacy, it was made clear to Alberta Education that no single sector of society is responsible for the literacy agenda. It was articulated clearly that educators, school authorities, parents, communities and students must work together to ensure the best opportunities for literacy development in students of all ages and abilities.

The following graphic depicts the dynamic and interrelated nature of literacy learning.

Literacy Collaboration Model

Communities
Community organizations and volunteers contribute to the shared responsibility of literacy development.
Families
Literacy development begins and is maintained in the home.
LITERACY
Individuals
Literacy is a personal responsibility.
Alberta Education
Alberta's curricula support students in developing the abilities to think deeply about what they are learning.
Schools and School Authorities
Schools and school authorities are critical builders of literacy.

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Relationship between the Provincial Literacy Framework and Alberta Education's Literacy Action Plan

The provincial literacy framework, *Living Literacy: A Literacy Framework for Alberta's Next Generation Economy* identifies the provincial vision for literacy:

> *Albertans have the literacy competencies to participate fully and successfully in living, learning and work.*

This vision is supported by four provincial literacy goals. Alberta Education has developed one strategy for each of these goals. Each strategy is supported by actions that will be accomplished through collaboration between Alberta Education and our partners and stakeholders.

The following chart depicts the relationship between the provincial literacy vision and goals, and Alberta Education's literacy strategies and actions.

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Provincial Literacy Vision

Albertans have the literacy competencies to participate fully and successfully in living, learning and work.

Provincial Literacy Goals

Goal 1: Increase Literacy

Goal 2: Build Awareness

Goal 3: Enhance Opportunities

Goal 4: Facilitate Partnerships

Alberta Education Strategies to Promote Literacy

Strategy #1
Promote literacy as an integral component of learning in the K–12 education system.

Strategy #2
Promote literacy learning by communicating the importance of literacy development for student success.

Strategy #3
Support professional learning opportunities that focus on literacy in all subject areas and grade levels.

Strategy #4
Design and support partnerships and collaborative working models with education stakeholders.

Actions:
- Identify, define and validate literacy skills.
- Integrate explicit literacy skills and strategies in curriculum for all grades and subject areas.

Actions:
- Communicate the definition of literacy to all education stakeholders to build a common understanding.
- Develop a literacy page on the Alberta Education website.
- Identify and share promising literacy practices and universal and targeted instructional strategies.
- Develop teacher resources to support diverse learners.

Actions:
- Complete a comprehensive professional learning legacy package (English and French) for use by teachers to develop skills in teaching literacy.
- Support professional learning by examining and sharing promising literacy practices and processes at the school and jurisdiction levels.
- Develop professional resources for teachers that demonstrate the integration of literacy instruction into all subject areas and grade levels.

Actions:
- Collaborate with partners and stakeholders to support literacy in the learning system.
- Participate in and support Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) and the Western and Northern Canadian Protocol (WNCP) in English and French literacy and language projects and activities.
- Collaborate with post-secondary institutions to increase knowledge and awareness around promising literacy practices in the K–12 system.

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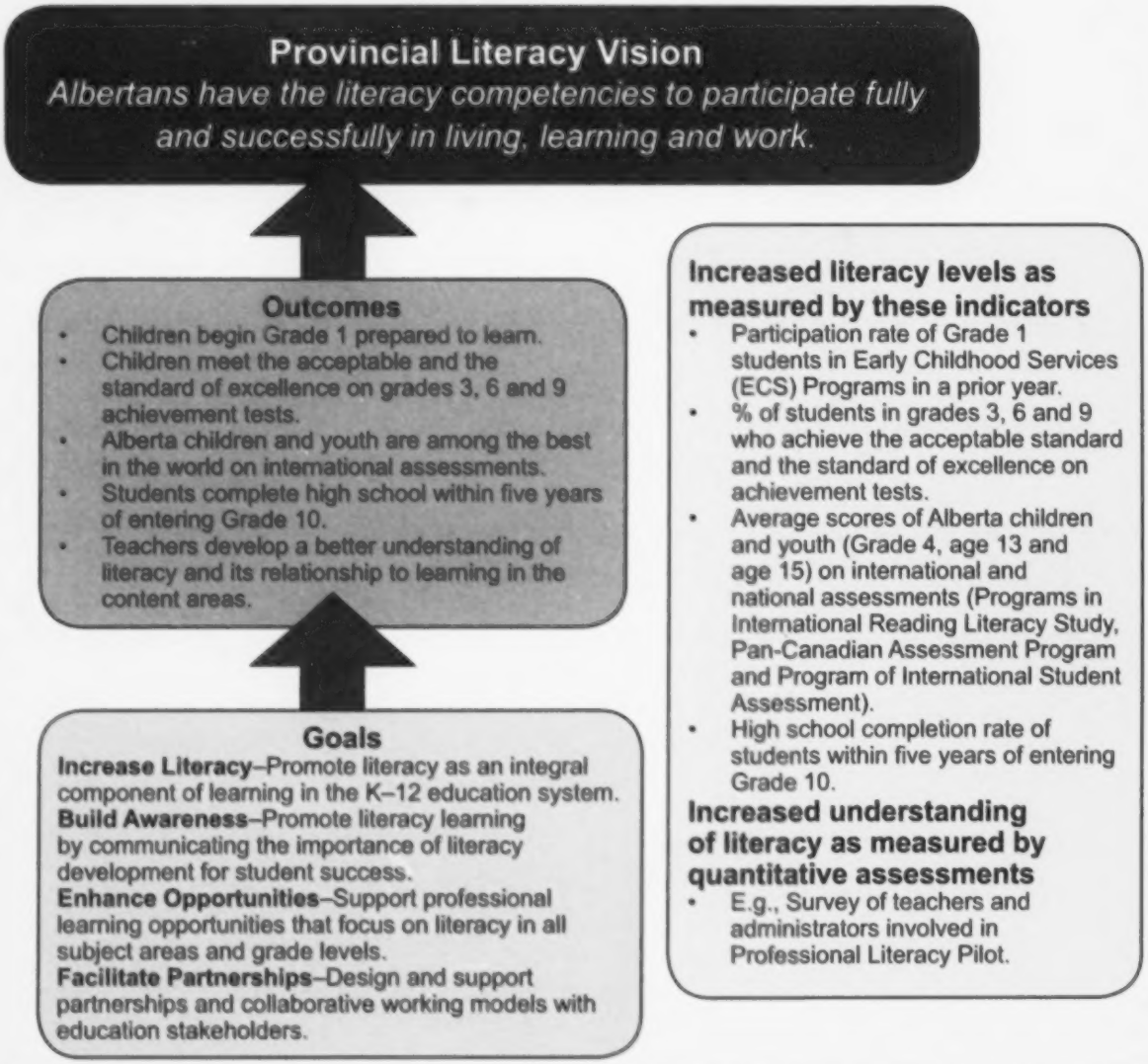
Monitoring and Reporting on Progress

Literacy First: A Plan for Action builds on the strengths of our current education system to provide Alberta students with literacy skills that will enable them to participate fully in their communities and in society at large. Regular and ongoing reporting will be necessary to measure progress and to ensure that Alberta Education is responding to the evolving needs of Alberta students and the education system.


Provincial Literacy Vision
Albertans have the literacy competencies to participate fully and successfully in living, learning and work.
Outcomes
• Children begin Grade 1 prepared to learn.
• Children meet the acceptable and the standard of excellence on grades 3, 6 and 9 achievement tests.
• Alberta children and youth are among the best in the world on international assessments.
• Students complete high school within five years of entering Grade 10.
• Teachers develop a better understanding of literacy and its relationship to learning in the content areas.
Goals
Increase Literacy–Promote literacy as an integral component of learning in the K–12 education system.
Build Awareness–Promote literacy learning by communicating the importance of literacy development for student success.
Enhance Opportunities–Support professional learning opportunities that focus on literacy in all subject areas and grade levels.
Facilitate Partnerships–Design and support partnerships and collaborative working models with education stakeholders.
Increased literacy levels as measured by these indicators
• Participation rate of Grade 1 students in Early Childhood Services (ECS) Programs in a prior year.
• % of students in grades 3, 6 and 9 who achieve the acceptable standard and the standard of excellence on achievement tests.
• Average scores of Alberta children and youth (Grade 4, age 13 and age 15) on international and national assessments (Programs in International Reading Literacy Study, Pan-Canadian Assessment Program and Program of International Student Assessment).
• High school completion rate of students within five years of entering Grade 10.
Increased understanding of literacy as measured by quantitative assessments
• E.g., Survey of teachers and administrators involved in Professional Literacy Pilot.

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